

# Virtue Ethics

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Aristotle

# Lecture Outline:

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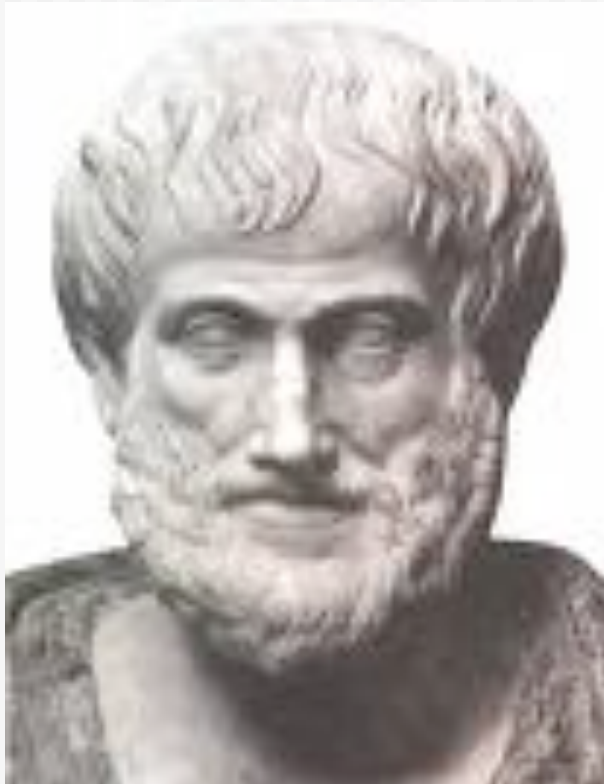
- Aristotle's Main Question.
- What “good” does and does not refer to.
- What the Supreme Good is.
- What is it for humans to possess the Supreme Good.
- One primary thing we have to do to achieve the Supreme Good.



- The 'Big Aristotle'??

# Historical Background

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- ❖ Born in Northern Greece (384-322 B.C)
- ❖ Student of Plato
- ❖ Tutor of Alexander the Great
- ❖ “Bit of a dandy...?”

## The Overarching Question Aristotle Seeks to Answer

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### WHAT CONSTITUTES THE GOOD LIFE?

- Then ask,

A good person?

Right Action?

In order to answer this main question though, he needs to answer a host of other important questions. First of which is:

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What do we mean by the term “good”?

- ❖ Contra Plato, the term “good” does not refer to a particular thing.
- ❖ In its most general sense, when we say “good”, we refer to...?

# But is there a Best (Ultimate) Good?

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That is, is there something we ultimately strive for  
That is Complete and Self-Sufficient?

❖ Self-Sufficient?

❖ Final?  
(Instrumental vs. Intrinsic)

So, is there such a good?

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# The Answer is YES!

For Aristotle, we all ultimately  
want and seek after  
what???



:)

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- Happiness (Eudaimonia)
- That is, to *do* well, and to *be* well.

# Question:

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What does Happiness consist in?

That is,

What does it look like for us humans to *do* well, and to *be* well?

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- Moderate amount of wealth
  - A long life; experience fortunate circumstances (e.g. health, friends, leisure)
  - Fulfill our Function

# Question:

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- So what is the Function (or Purpose) of a human being according to Aristotle??
- In order to know *how* to do well, we need to know what it is that we, as humans, *do*

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- ❖ Our function is to be rational (to live in accordance with reason). We are, for Aristotle, 'rational animals'.
  - ❖ (Could find out our Function by finding out *what kind of thing we are*.  
--plants vs. animals vs. humans.) c.f. pp. 25-27; 35.

# Question:

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- What is it to be rational (to live in accordance with reason)?

# On being rational...our thinking

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To be rational, then, means to:

- Exercise one's intellectual capacities (have to think well):

More specifically,

- Exhibit the Intellectual Virtues:

# On being rational...our thinking

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Some Intellectual Virtues:

- Practical Wisdom
- Science
- Art
- Philosophic Wisdom (contemplate truth!)

(Note: IV's are acquired by being taught; by being educated)



# On being rational...our behavior

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Also, to be rational, means to:

- ❖ Exhibit the correct emotion, (and to the right degree), according to what the circumstances call for (P.38). **To be able to do this is to exhibit the moral virtues.**

# A Brief Summary

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- So, the one who fulfills their function, (which is to be rational), will exhibit the intellectual and moral virtues to the fullest extent possible.

# More on the Moral Virtues:

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- What is a moral virtue exactly?

Some examples:

- Courage
- Temperance
- Generosity (liberality)
- Modesty
- Friendliness

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Given the general nature of a moral virtue, we still need to know:

- The actual emotions that we are capable of feeling

And, most importantly,

- Generally, what constitutes the correct emotion (what is it to experience an emotion to the right degree)?

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## ❖ Examples of human emotions (passions):

- Various appetites
- Anger
- Joy
- Envy
- Fear
- Longing
- Pity
- Friendly feeling (Not to be confused with the virtue of friendliness)

# On being rational...our behavior

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- ❖ The correct emotion (or passion) one should feel (or the correct action one should do), in any given circumstance, is the intermediate one that falls in between two extremes, one extreme being excess, the other deficiency --**This is the Doctrine of the Mean.**

# Some Examples:

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- ❖ FEAR (a natural human emotion).
- ❖ The rational person knows which situations call for fear and to what degree, and which situations do not.
- ❖ A person who feels an excess of fear in a situation is **cowardly**.
- ❖ A person who feels too little fear in a situation is **foolhardy**.

# Examples...

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- ❖ A person who feels the correct amount of fear in a situation is **brave**.
- ❖ NOTE: Cowardice, Foolhardiness, and Bravery are strictly speaking not emotions. Rather they are dispositions or character traits



# Examples...

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- ❖ E.G. to say a person is brave is to say that he is disposed to feel the appropriate amount of fear in a situation that may call for it; not too much fear, not too little.
- ❖ Feeling too much or too little of an emotion (passion) is to have a Vice. E.g. cowardice
- ❖ Feeling the appropriate amount is to have a Virtue. E.g. bravery.

# Examples...

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- ❖ Another Example: Desire for and pursuit of bodily pleasure (a normal human feeling and action)

Too much= Wantonness (**Vice**)

Too little= Extreme Asceticism (**Vice**)

Right Amount= Temperance (**Virtue**)

# Examples...

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- Another Example: Giving and taking of Money (a normal human action)

Too Little= Stinginess (**Vice**)

Too Much= Wastefulness (**Vice**)

Right Amount= Generous (**Virtue**)

# Note Well:

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❖ Some vices, for Aristotle, do not admit of a mean. What is he saying here?

--envy (emotion)

--spite (emotion)

--theft (action)

--murder (action)

# Note Well:

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- The Doctrine of the Mean is **not** a Doctrine of Moderation

Illustration: Anger